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PORTRAIT OF HIS SON  
By EL GRECO

Courtesy Art Institute

# The Third Centennial of El Greco in Toledo

By KATHERINE MAXEY

**I**N Madrid the question often propounded to the fortunate person who emerges from his first inspection of the glories of the Prado is, "What do you think of El Greco?" If he is hasty or prejudiced he will say what he thinks; if he is cowardly he will dodge the question and try to take the cue from his interlocutor; but, if he is an honest, temperate soul, of an ordinary degree of culture, he is very apt to admit in a troubled way, that he does not know, yet. In fact the paintings of El Greco present, at first sight, qualities of beauty which any educated artistic sense must recognize and admire, but they possess also other qualities so new and even disagreeable as to disturb appreciation and impel a suspended judgment.

There are many ingenious theories advanced in explanation of what most persons regard as El Greco's peculiar faults—such as a defect of vision, or even a deliberate falsification of material forms in the service of imaginative truth. Greco enthusiasts fight valiantly, each from the vantage ground of his chosen theory. But what is most interesting to the average art lover is, that this painter, who so often offends the most cherished ideals of beauty, can be the same who so gloriously and strangely presents those ideals, and this at times in the same picture. What *we* think of El Greco of course matters a great deal to ourselves, because it determines his place as a source of inspiration to us; but what the Spanish think of him may interest us also, in that they have an intimacy of understanding and appreciation to which we can hardly attain. What the Spanish think of El Greco was expressed in part by the spectacle of the third centennial celebration of El Greco

held in Toledo during Holy Week of last year.

El Greco, in becoming its interpreter, has blessed the city of his adoption as few cities are blessed. It is strange indeed that this man, supposedly Cretan by birth, should have so penetrated and expressed the very essence of the stern but elusive Spanish temperament. There is in the Greco collection at Toledo a picture of the city, which



"ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN"

By EL GRECO

Courtesy Art Institute



BURIAL OF COUNT D'ORGAZ-DETAIL HEAD  
By EL GRECO

*Courtesy Art Institute*

"L'ANNUNCIATION"  
By EL GRECO

*Courtesy Art Institute*



one might almost call a portrait of her soul. There is nothing in it of our modern regard for atmospheric truth or color, nor is it a picture of the Toledo that the careless tourist sees, fascinating as even that Toledo can be. This is the city that stands on her red cliffs, with the crashing Tagus at her feet, lifting her walls like a shield, and helmeted with towers; the stern Toledo, facing with centuries of resolution in her aspect the bitter brown plains where danger creeps, the grey green sky above her torn with livid lightnings; Toledo the tragic, the fiery, the

steadfast, Toledo the city of swords!

In the character of El Greco there must have been some deep and kindred harmony with the Spanish nature. He studied in the Venetian schools, but his paintings seem to have little of the joyous spirit of the Italian or of his own native land. He is El Greco the Spaniard and the painter of the Spaniard, of the Spaniard garbed in sober black, the man who could suffer and make others suffer for what he held to be the truth; whose humor even was tinged with bitterness, whose faith was both tender and



*KING FERDINAND  
By EL GRECO*

*Courtesy Art Institute*

fierce; who, lifting the wine of life, drank with a sombre smile to the kingship of death.

He had absolutely the Spanish feeling for the values of life. It shows nowhere more than in what is perhaps his greatest picture, the painting of "The Burial of the Conde 'de Orgaz." There is nothing of sentimentalism, nothing of sensationalism in this painting; but there emanates from it a feeling of Death the Inevitable such as is expressed in only the very greatest of poetry or music. He shows us Life, whose end is death, but not hopelessly—because he paints the Heaven above—but so heavy and so absorbing has he made the lower part of the picture that one hardly lifts the eye to the upper. Regarded as a decoration, this painting is a glorious thing. Seeing the picture in its low white-domed

chapel removes that which in the reproductions some people feel is a disagreeable separation of the two parts of the composition. Here the heavenly scene lifts unobtrusively into the white of the upper walls and ceiling. The lower portion has the weight of what the actual presence of a group of people standing in the chapel might be. As for the color—gold, crimson, black and white—it is a decorative combination of the most splendid kind. From the standpoint of portraiture this painting is wonderful indeed. No one who has ever seen it can forget the penetrating sweetness and beauty of the young face of St. Stephen or the dignity and tenderness of the St. Augustine. In fact every face in the burial group is a portrait executed on the finest plane of that art.

As a painter of religious subjects and of



SAINT PETER  
By EL GRECO

*Courtesy Art Institute*



the Spanish point of view of such subjects Greco stands alone. The paintings of the great Italians most often seem to be lovely allegories of religious truth; but El Greco's strange, twisted, flame-like figures are symbols of his vision of eternal powers. It is inconsistent to accuse a man who can draw wonderfully at times of being unable to draw, and also difficult to account for what appears to be an absolutely outrageous disregard for the decencies of draftsmanship, which latter occurs generally in paintings of some supernatural theme and comes finally to seem deliberate. It gives to certain paintings the peculiar appearance of a vision seen through rising waves of heat.

It was for this man, who is as the eyes of the body spiritual of Spain, that the great memorial Mass was sung by a Cardinal, as-

sisted by the Archbishop of Toledo and the Papal Nuncio, in the Cathedral of Toledo on Monday, April 7, 1914. What other nation has paid to one of its master painters such a tribute as this? Would that I could give even a very faint impression of the scene. The great catafalque with its pall of black and silver, upon which were laid the painter's palette and brushes, surrounded by massive bronze candelabra; the sea of kneeling people before the high altar with its successive flights of steps and lovely grill; behind them the beautiful choir; the subdued gorgeousness of color—black and gold; and the rich tones of the Archbishop's and Nuncio's robes; the music of Mozart's wonderful mass pealing and echoing through the dim bronze sculptured heights, and the distant jewels of windows that

glowed far up in the shadows. Added to this, one of the most famous preachers in Spain pronounced the eulogy—a passionate and splendid tribute to the artist's hand and soul.

The House and Museum of El Greco were opened to the public during the celebration. The buildings are owned by the Marquis de la Vega-Inclán, whose own good taste and enthusiasm, aided by the knowledge of Senor Cossio, the well known authority on El Greco, have made of these buildings one of the most perfect and charming of monuments. The delightful gardens, filled with iris at this season; old pools and fountains in the Moorish style; bits of Roman sculpture found in the excavations at Toledo; lovely old red brick and Moorish tiles—these make of the place a thing to long remember.

The interior of the house was equally satisfying. The low rooms, lighted by old leaded glass windows with beautiful antique *refas* guarding them; ancient rugs and heavy carved furniture; old books and pictures and pieces of pottery; the great *brasero* in its carved wooden standard, placed beneath the table where in olden times the half-frozen student could place his feet close to the sullen charcoal fire and at least pretend that he felt a little warmth. Everything in such perfect harmony of taste and spirit and time that the days of El Greco live again for our delight.

And the unforgettable kitchen with its great hooded fireplace, and little settle at either side, half under the black vault into whose night the yellow sparks were wont to fly up and vanish. Here are treasures of blue and yellow Spanish potteries and some lovely pieces of Moorish lustre. What must the shimmer of firelight have been on those soapbubble surfaces? This house is more than museum—it is a museum with a soul, and that is the highest praise that can be given itself and its worthy creators.

What is true of the house is likewise true of the galleries which adjoin it. The wall-

covering is of beautiful tan-colored grass cloth. A very few simple wooden benches the only furniture—the crest of the family Vega Inclán being used as an inconspicuous decoration on these. The paintings are hung low, and each given space and position to be seen to best advantage. All of the works in this collection are the better for being used as gallery pictures, whereas our beautiful Chicago Greco "The Assumption" loses in being removed from its architectural altar setting.

A complete and splendid photographic collection of the entire work of El Greco comprises the remainder of the exhibit. It is difficult to imagine a thing of this sort more beautiful and satisfying; but here again skill, perfect judgment and good taste have created a work of art in the appearance of the gallery itself. The photographic collection must be an invaluable aid to anyone making a comparative study of the different periods of El Greco's artistic development.

All day long the galleries were thronged with people, visitors to the city or native Toledans. Dapper cadets from the military academy, old beggar-women with children in arms, peasants in quaint hats and velveteens and embroideries, dignified officials, artists, priests, students, professors, travelers, in a seemingly never-ending stream passed the patient guards at the door. Toledo knows its master painter and loves him. True it is that certain classes may make of their idol a sort of country fair attraction with which to bring in pennies, but that has been the fate of saints and heroes since time began, and El Greco suffers some at their hands with the rest.

On Tuesday afternoon the Greco monument was unveiled. A small park near the house of the great painter has been given by the city, and here the monument is placed. The day was hot and windy and the white Toledan dust blew up in choking clouds. It seemed as if the blinding grit



had found its way into the very horns of the brass band, making them husky.

That night a celebration was held in the Teatro Rojo, its auditorium crowded. The Papal Nuncio and the Archbishop had boxes of honor next the stage. Other boxes were bright with a plentiful representation of Spanish beauty and celebrity, and the galleries thronged with the all-pervading cadet. The program consisted of speeches and short lectures on El Greco and old Toledo. Some commemorative poetry, composed for the occasion, was also read.

It was the principal speaker of the evening, however, who gave me the most memorable thrill—I might almost say, fright. A powerful speaker, and so considered by his fellow countrymen, he began in a low, very low, tense voice. "How much time do you give him?" whispered my little California friend to her neighbor from Maryland. "For what?" interjected I, somewhat puzzled. "To roar, of course," my Californian answered, already bracing herself for the shock. Nor was she mistaken, for at the next instant roar he did, and continued to steadily for the next hour. As for the matter of his speech it was excellent, but as to its manner, that was almost too exciting for quiet intellectual enjoyment. It will be easily understood what my sensations were when, after a complete and eloquent condemnation of some mercenary countrymen who had been guilty of selling some of the most treasured Grecos, he spoke in accents of gathering sorrow and indignation concerning the loss of that great "Assumption," a picture unique in Greco's art, and then, in mounting tones of thunder, of the metropolis of outer darkness, Philistine of the Philistines, "Chicago," where it was now owned. The name was ripped out in a perfect catclysm of grief

and scorn. Being in all probability the only representative present from that city of outer darkness I felt like a rabbit lacking a burrow to shelter it from the wrath descending, the while an ill-controlled sense of amusement on the part of my companions I might say added little to the comfort of the situation.

Nor was this the last allusion, during the *fiesta*, to the Art Institute Greco. It reappeared in connection with the pretty one-act play presented by Maria Guerro (whom many consider the greatest actress in Spain) and Mendoza, her titled actor-husband, wherein was portrayed an incident from the life of Santa Teresa. The part of the fascinating Saint was taken by Guerro, and, whatever may be said of its success as an interpretation of this Saint's very complex personality, it proved to be a charming bit of acting. Santa Teresa has come, on her round of visits, to one of the struggling convents she has lately founded. She is facing poverty, misunderstanding, as well as persecution due to jealousy of her spiritual power, and as a climax finds her friend and beloved advisor, San Juan de la Cruz, in danger from his support of her cause. The triumph of her curious and compelling personality, with its mixture of ardor, humor and mysticism, over all the dangers that beset her, is cleverly shown. It is a triumph most complete. At the close of the play, crossing to the farther end of the stage, she draws aside the heavy curtain that veils the convent's treasure, acquired through ever more rigid self-denial though self-denial was the rule. It is El Greco's great "Assumption" that she stands silent before—the picture that hangs today in the Art Institute of Chicago and which the people of Toledo mourn as one of the most beautiful of their lost treasures.